

VZCZCXRO1606
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHAM #1871/01 1760559
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 240559Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2928
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 001871

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/27/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: TRIBAL CONSERVATIVES PUSH PUBLIC GATHERINGS LAW
THROUGH LOWER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT

REF: A. AMMAN 1533
[1](#)B. AMMAN 1570

AMMAN 00001871 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On the strength of a bloc of tribal conservatives, the lower house of parliament has endorsed amendments to Jordan's public gatherings law. The pro-government bloc pushed the bill through despite several attempts by a coalition of Islamists and liberals to either water it down or defeat it outright. The new law maintains the requirement of receiving permission from the governor for public gatherings, but reduces the time needed to obtain such approvals. It also exempts routine, internal civil society gatherings from the permission regime. The debate over the law was acrimonious at times, leading to the sense among lawmakers and activists that the new law is only the start of a longer, gradual process of reform in this arena. The passage of the law demonstrates the strength of tribal conservatives, who still outweigh reformers in Jordan's parliament. End Summary.

The More Things Change...

[1](#)2. (SBU) Jordan's lower house of parliament endorsed amendments to the Public Gatherings Law on June 22 after a contentious series of debates. Despite opposition from a coalition of Islamic Action Front (IAF) deputies and many liberal MPs, the bill was passed mainly with the votes of tribal conservatives. Note: Since parliament is only using the USAID-funded electronic voting system for non-controversial measures, there was no count of how many MPs opposed the bill. End Note. Despite some early noises about further watering down the system of obtaining permission for public demonstrations and weakening the role of the governor, in the end the law passed without significant changes. It now moves to the senate, where a similar coalition of tribal conservatives will likely pass it without further amendment.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The main change enshrined in the new law involves non-public meetings (such as board meetings, internal planning sessions, etc). Under the previous law, non-governmental organizations required the governor's permission to hold such gatherings. That permission was granted in a vast majority of circumstances, but was occasionally used to prevent civil society discussions on politically sensitive issues (Ref A). The new law redefines public gatherings to exclude these internal meetings from the permission regime.

[1](#)4. (C) While the permission regime was relaxed for non-public meetings, it essentially remains in place for all other gatherings. The previous law required groups to submit

requests for public gatherings 72 hours in advance. Under the new law, demonstrations must be submitted to the governor for approval 48 hours before the event. Public freedoms committee chair Fahri Iskander told Poloff that there were moves within the committee to further reduce the permission period to 24 hours, but this change did not make it into the final version. Similarly, an amendment was introduced during the floor debate that would have required organizers of a gathering to "inform" the governor rather than seek permission. This amendment was also defeated.

15. (C) Like the previous statute, the new law fails to address the standards by which permission for a public gathering can be denied. Contacts within civil society believe that the lack of measurable (and challengeable) standards remains the main flaw in the statute. Iskander essentially agreed, saying that the law "should give a definition" of where the red lines are, but indicated that the parliament would have to receive a stronger signal from the government in order to implement those changes.

Acrimonious Debate

16. (U) Reaction to the new public gatherings law from Jordanian politicians and civil society leaders started off as cautiously optimistic. A May 22 story in mainstream daily Al-Ghad cited a chorus of praise from opposition political party leaders. Even the IAF, normally a one-stop shop for anti-government tirades, issued a mild statement which called the new law "encouraging" and expressed "hope that (the new public gatherings law) will be the beginning of a new stage of political relaxation." IAF head Bani-Irshaid said on the same day that while the government "will be credited for reviewing a difficult stage, achieving consensus, and

AMMAN 00001871 002.2 OF 003

strengthening political participation."

17. (U) Yet when the law was introduced in parliament, a coalition of Islamist and leftist MPs attempted to reject it after the first reading - before the bill had even been considered by a committee. The effort ultimately failed, and the bill was referred to the legal committee for markup, yet the hostile mood of the legislature was clear. After the vote which sent the bill to the committee, MP Bassem Hadadin told the English language Jordan Times that moves against the bill were sparked by the fact that it introduced only "superficial changes" to the existing law. Mohammed Al-Qaq, spokesman for the IAF-dominated Higher Coordinating Council of Opposition Parties, remarked that the law "did not come with anything new" and postulated that "Jordan is caught in a pincer, and the executive authority cannot cope with the problems that may arise if the people are suppressed."

18. (SBU) When the bill was introduced on the floor, MPs from the IAF and various liberal blocs again attempted to defeat the bill outright. Ali Dalaeen, a populist deputy from Karak, said during the debate that "every time we feel some breathing space, the government brings a law that suppresses us again." Other deputies chimed in with similar criticisms, and charged that the new law would "tarnish the Kingdom's reputation." For its part, the government offered a letter (rather than an in-person defense on the floor of parliament) explaining that the bill was part of a "political reform program" which ensures "freedom of opinion and human rights." Conservative MPs were blunter in their reasoning, warning in the debate that Jordan's stability would be threatened if an opening was created for opposition voices.

19. (U) After the vote, opponents of the bill voiced their frustration with the lack of progress on public freedoms in Jordan. Leftist MP Bassem Hadadin wrote in Al-Ghad that the vote "ensured that the Jordanian parliament remained a stronghold of the conservative movement which hampers the King's ideas about reforming democracy in Jordan." Other MPs

complained in the press that parliament speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali did not allow enough time for debate on the floor of parliament, and manipulated parliamentary procedure to force a final vote before other amendments could be proposed.

Too Far, or Not Far Enough?

¶10. (C) Conservative political commentators and MPs continue to portray Jordan's choice as one of chaos versus control. Iskander told the Al-Ghad newspaper, "public meetings and rallies should be approved by the administrative governor. We can't leave the country to the influence of civil society institutions. The draft law is a step in the right direction." Former Minister of Social Development Amim Mashaqbeh noted that "sometimes restrictions are essential to safeguard the security and stability of the country. The government should have the upper hand." MP Hamad Abu Zeid, also a local sheikh, told Poloff that he "has faith that meetings will be distinguished from protests appropriately" by the authorities.

¶11. (C) Behind closed doors, Iskander argued that he was not fully supportive of the new law, but nevertheless supported it as an adequate half-measure. He believes that the law should be split into sub-sections which deal with public gatherings of different types - political party gatherings, organizational meetings, mass public demonstrations - with different rules for each type of public gathering. The National Agenda recommends the complete abolishment of the permission regime for all public gatherings. Like many of our contacts in parliament, Iskander thinks that this is naive at best. He sees any political opening for opposition groups as a crack in Jordan's defenses against instability. When jokingly asked whether he was waiting for a solution to all of Jordan's political problems (thereby eradicating the need for public protests) as a precondition for a more liberal public gatherings law, Iskander answered in all seriousness, "yes, that's exactly what we're looking for."

¶12. (SBU) Liberal and Islamist MPs, along with many media commentators, continue to prefer the public gatherings law which was in effect between 1952 and 2001. That law required notification, but not approval, of public gatherings, and was the basis of the failed attempt to further amend the draft law on the floor of parliament. Ruhail Gharaibeh, a spokesman for the IAF, said that "we want the law to be like it was 55 years ago, where the governor would only be informed of a rally." Iskander, however, points to other parts of the 1952 law which were more restrictive than its current iteration, such as the requirement for notification for any gathering (regardless of purpose) which contained

AMMAN 00001871 003.2 OF 003

more than seven people in one place.

Comment

¶13. (C) The passage of the public gatherings law is a barometer of where the cause of internal reform stands in Jordan. The emergence of a coalition of Islamists, leftists, and liberals on this issue may be a sign that the cause of reform can unite ideologically opposed factions, even if that unity is only temporary. Yet those who are willing to stand up for greater openness are unwilling or unable to take their case to the public, outnumbered by tribal conservatives, and lacking in palatable alternatives. For its part, the government is either distracted by economic issues, not fully supportive of political reform as spelled out in the National Agenda, or both. Without a clear mandate from the government for change, tribal conservatives in parliament will continue to pass measures which inch towards political openness on the margins, but fail to address the fundamental issues that define the relationship between the Jordanian state and its citizens.

Visit Embassy Amman's Classified Website at
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/amman>
Hale